



10 TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEEN DURING THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

...or anytime during the teen years.

Multiple sources estimate the amount of time a teen spends with a parent is only 1-2 hours per day, yet that same teen, and many adults, spend 7-9 hours on screens, making the task of influencing our teen's thoughts and behavior even more difficult. One of the best ways to ensure teens stay safe online and off(line) is simply to be the kind of parent a kid wants to talk to, even if time together is limited.

Intentionally applying the guidance below will increase the odds of positive and more frequent conversation, which will not only provide a supportive base as your teen walks through the college admissions process, but will also provide a solid foundation for a great future relationship as two adults.

1 Listen and be respectful of your teen as his/her own person.

It's human nature to make connections to our own stories when we listen to others, but the best listeners keep those connections to themselves, or bring up comparisons rarely and carefully. Use your experiences to be empathetic, not to take over the conversation.

2 Use a risk-based trust building approach.

Helping our teens understand through conversations that situations like driving to and from school or running an errand in daylight have different risk levels than driving long distances or in an unfamiliar city, or with a gaggle of friends at night. Say "no" or "not now" when needed, but allow teens to spread their wings and build confidence by helping them evaluate situations and behave accordingly whether you are there or not. Demonstrate trust by setting limits while allowing them more freedom (and responsibility) through each year of high school.



3 Turn off the "sky is falling" responses. Don't catastrophize. Be positive.

Teens need a voice of calm or simply a place to vent when things don't go their way. One failing grade on an AP assignment or a snub from a best friend doesn't warrant a parent's overreaction or generalization that life is horrible and so-and-so must be a terrible person. Remember to listen, ask open-ended questions, and help them find the bright side, including learning from a hard lesson.

4 Ask, do you want my opinion? Provide constructive feedback. Praise appropriately.

Be slow to offer your opinion or give feedback. Ask first; sometimes kids just need to vent in order to process emotions, just like adults often do. Don't try to solve every problem even if the answer is as plain as day (to you), and remember to find ways to give genuine praise, particularly related to how they are handling emotional and mental health challenges.



5 Accept the normal developmental milestones of seeking autonomy and independence.

It's ok to say to our teens that this is new territory for us. That is, allowing them to drive off solo or with friends, or make decisions about courses, jobs, and other activities after more than a dozen years of controlling almost every aspect of their lives. Even if you are no longer making the decisions, ask "why" questions to your teen in a non-threatening and non-defensive way in order to help them learn to think through situations and potential consequences, both good and bad, intended and unintended.

6 Show up: at games, activities, meet-your-teacher nights, concerts, and every other opportunity to engage.

Showing up is not the same as hovering. Be in the stands, cheer kindly, know what's going on in your kid's life without micromanaging, and use the knowledge you gain from showing up in future conversations with your teen. Start a tradition within a sports season or other time. During my daughter's senior lacrosse season we drove to games separately out of necessity, but that allowed me to pick up hot chocolate-- we live in Minnesota, so some of those spring night games get pretty chilly-- on the way home. We'd enjoy the warm drinks while talking about highlights of the game, emphasizing her thoughts and recap before offering my own, and my own were focused on constructive and positive, never "so-and-so played horribly tonight!"

7 Be the adult: regulate emotions and don't over-empathize or try to solve all their problems.

I won't preach here. No one is perfect, least of all any parent of teens on the planet. For me, a strongly emotional mama bear who likes to help people and solve problems, I have had to be intentional and work hard at this one. I know I'm not alone. I can say, though, that the work has paid off based on the critiques I hear from my kids occasionally, e.g., "she doesn't even know how to do laundry", or, "it seems like he's expecting me to be his mom and figure it out for him".



The emotional
whiplash of
being a parent
of a teen



- 8 Shine a mirror on ourselves first, including rules for phones at meals, on car rides, or at other times.**

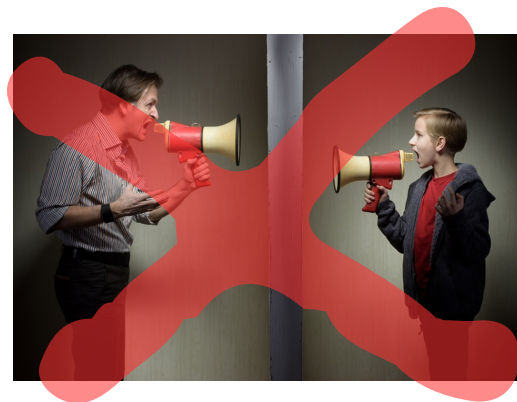
Most of us have grown quite attached to our hand-held computers, otherwise known as smart phones, and even though most teens are seemingly even more attached, it is vital to be intentional about device rules. No judgement, simply reflect on your own usage- home, meals, driving (DON'T), walking, when "present" at a school function- and determine if there are ways to improve, or at least share your internal guidelines with your teen. Establish "black out" times at meals and in the car until after a discussion, no phones in the bedroom overnight, and no phone use while walking are all possible places to start. Hard to make those deeper connections and have decent conversations if we are constantly distracted, so if you haven't, set a few rules for the entire family.

- 9 Do things together: prepare meals, have games nights, start a tradition, go on a breakfast or lunch date, take a class, sign up for a 5k, volunteer, complete a DIY house project, and many more.**

This is by far the best way to build a closer relationship with your budding young adult: simply by sharing an activity. Our favorite is taco and game night. If these types of bonding times are not the norm in your household, or even if they are, check the date and time before assuming everyone has the night free. Spontaneity is great, but committing something to the calendar will demonstrate that the activity is important to you, and that you also respect their schedules. My kids know I am very supportive of them having friends and a life outside our home, but they also know that family time is important. When my kids are home from college we set a date and time a week or two in advance so no one sets up competing plans. There are a myriad of other ways to spend time together; find one that works for you and your family. It might take a few tries.

10 Discuss current affairs, popular tv shows or movies, or use question cards like Table Topics to spark conversation around the dinner table, or anytime.

Every conversation doesn't need to revolve around school, who they're hanging out with, or college admissions. Watch the news together and discuss the latest events, or simply how a story is presented and what context might be missing. Ask about tv shows they enjoy or use conversation starters like those on Table Topics cards. I am not affiliated with the company, but have several sets of their cards and appreciate the various themes available, e.g., Travel, Teen, and What Would You Do? Also, start asking your teen for feedback on a challenge you are facing, or for their opinions about a particular topic.



And a bonus...

Build adult communication skills such as speaking with other adults, advocating for oneself, power of the pause, and making and communicating decisions.

High school years are an important time to build adult communication skills, and parents play a big role in that. Role play discussions with other adults, practice interview skills, talk about and demonstrate how to advocate for yourself, and, particularly if you or your child is deeply emotional or sensitive, talk about the "power of the pause". In other words, when you feel emotion welling up inside of you, take a step back, whether 10 seconds or 10 hours or longer, before firing off an email or responding to someone who has hurt them. Give them permission to tell you when they are overwhelmed or highly stressed and just need time to process or cool down. Likewise, model that behavior when you are not having a good day or simply need some time and space to process. Not only is this healthy mentally, but will build trust between you and your teen.